

Article

OK computer? Digital community archaeologies in practice

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OK computer? Digital community archaeologies in practice

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The articles in this section of *Internet Archaeology* came out of a [Theoretical Archaeology Group](#) session at Manchester University in 2014. The session was motivated to explore issues associated with 'digital public archaeology' (DPA). It addressed the ways in which digital methods mediated or challenged the practice of public archaeology, an aspect of archaeology that has often emphasised communities defined by an attachment to place, frequently framed by the archaeological site. Increasingly digital technologies are allowing a breakdown of the focus on physical place, and change in the concept of 'community' (cf. Waterton [2010](#)), with the potential to connect geographically disparate populations. Moreover, we wondered whether the mitigation of archaeological practice by digital media, which has been argued to lead to the unclear ontological statuses of material culture (Tringham [2010](#); Carusi *et al.* [2011](#)), led to any specific issues with the practice of digital public archaeology.

The need for archaeologists to engage thoughtfully with digital technologies has been recognised by a number of organisations (including in the UK the [Archaeology Data Service](#), [Heritage Lottery Fund](#), and [Institute for](#)

[Archaeologists](#)), and anecdotally, greater numbers of projects appear to be defined by their predominantly digital work. These have variously leveraged notions of 'crowd-sourcing', 'engagement', 'dissemination', or 'publicity' (e.g. Richardson [2013](#); Bonacchi [2012](#)). As well as the challenges and opportunities relevant to all public archaeology initiatives, work that includes a significant digital public archaeology component might share a series of more specific concerns.

Projects can adopt approaches to engagement with the archaeological record that range from 'bottom up' to 'top down' (cf. Tully [2007](#); Moshenska [2008](#); Belford [2011](#)), and web platforms can also enable the collaborative production of resources by groups who might not define themselves as archaeologists, but who nevertheless strongly and directly connect with the historic environment (e.g. neopagans, historical reenactors, and metal detectorists).

The articles presented here deal with a number of themes which arise when doing digital public archaeology. [Williams and Atkin](#) dissect the highly specific encounters that may occur with human remains, memorials and other aspects of mortuary archaeology in digital public fora. They consider the ethics of interaction with human remains and the strategies by which digital media can promote, educate and engage public audiences with archaeological projects and research relating to death and the dead. [Bonacchi and Moshenska](#) situate DPA within the wider context of public archaeology approaches, and the potential that digital media have to augment communication strategies with members of the public. At the same time they emphasise the importance of critically evaluating the effectiveness of digital work - especially in terms of impact and sustainability. [Griffiths et al.](#) point out that DPA is not mere uni-directional knowledge transfer, and that it can include post-excavation and methodological research - that public archaeology should not be limited to activity 'at the trowel edge'.

We hope that these articles, and all the webcasts from the original TAG session on [YouTube](#), will provide food for thought in terms of the role DPA may play in the future. We do not wish to appear as proselytisers for a shiny new digital

future that is the panacea to issues in contemporary heritage and archaeology. However, we do suggest that as part of a need to be publically accountable and accessible, a digital component is increasingly important in projects, whether undertaken in the academic, professional or other spheres. DPA touches on a wide array of issues, as the article on crowd-sourcing archaeological research by [Griffiths *et al.*](#) emphasises, but as part of the toolkit for exciting, creative and playful engagement, digital approaches offer a range of possibilities.

Features

- Key words: communication, community archaeology, digital media, digital public archaeology
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